

# Literature with an Asia focus P-12

A list of selected literature written by Asian and non-Asian authors about Asia or Australia from an Asian perspective suitable for P-12 available at the Languages & Multicultural Education Resource Centre.

Some of the titles in this list and in the LMERC collection illuminate aspects of the experience of Asian Australians, some tell the stories of journeys by Australians to Asian countries. The stories illustrate intercultural understanding and or misunderstanding, dispel myths, and encourage curiosity about contemporary and traditional lifestyles, belief systems, customs and mythology. LMERC also holds & can provide links to numerous non-fiction resources for teaching about Asia from the perspective of beliefs, human rights, environment & animals, families and society, natural disasters, food, games, arts and current issues in many forms: picture books, folktales and fiction and non-fiction books & films suitable for all levels.

Baillie, Allan (2005) ***A taste of cockroach: stories from the wild side***. Penguin.

Twelve stories with settings that reflect Baillie's love of travel and adventure in Asia although there is one story set a bit further away, on Mars, and others set in the past in Australia. One, *The Gold Buddha*, set many years ago in Laos, would make a good read aloud and introduce young readers to unfamiliar territory.

Also by Allan Baillie:

***Little Brother*** (1986) **Cambodia** in the time of the Khmer Rouge **Middle Years: yrs 5-9**

***The China Coin*** (1991) **China** **Yrs 4-8**

***Saving Abbie*** (2000) **Indonesia** **Yrs 4-8**

***Krakatoa lighthouse*** (2009) based on the eruption of the volcano in 1883. **Indonesia** **Yrs 4-8**

Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra (2004) ***The Conch Bearer***, Chicken House. **India**

Anand, his sister and mother are living on the edge of starvation. His father left to find work years ago and has not been heard from since. And now an old man with strange powers has asked his help in returning a priceless magical artefact to its home in a hidden city in the Himalayas. **Middle Years: yrs 7-9**

Catran, Wendy (2001) ***Not raining today***. Lothian. **Tibet**

In Lhasa, two young Tibetan Buddhist nuns watch helplessly as their close friend is taken prisoner by the 'green uniforms' – members of the Chinese occupying force. In an act of support, they go to his room and remove the poster of the Dalai Lama he has hidden there and that night pin it to a public wall. From that act comes the need for them to be smuggled out of Tibet: one, Dolma, is captured before setting out, the other, Lhamo, makes it to safety after a terrifying and life-threatening journey. **Middle Years: yrs 5-9**

Clarke, Judith (2004) ***Kalpana's dream***. Allen & Unwin, **Australia/India**

In this warm, funny novel, Neema and her friend, Kate, are starting Secondary School. Neema's great grandmother, Kalpana, has arrived from India for an extended visit, and hesitantly the relationship between the two develops, and Neema learns about the past. **Middle Years: yrs 6-8**

Cho, Tom (2009) ***Look who's morphing***, Giramondo Publishing

A series of short stories using characters from pop culture to stand in for, or play with, the idea of the 'authentic', stable and unchanging subject- including their relationships with others. This series of interconnected short stories thwarts our attempts to find the true and possibly stereotypical identity of the author (Asian author) behind the text. **Senior secondary /adult**

Every  
child,  
every  
opportunity

Compestine, Ying Chang (2007) ***Revolution is not a dinner party: a novel***, Penguin. **China**

The story of Ling and her family set during the last years of the Cultural Revolution 1972-76. The once genteel life of Ling and her parents (two doctors) slowly unravels as the family comes under the scrutiny of the new tenant (an officious member of the Red Guard) in the hospital- staff apartment block where the family live. This is an accessible and powerful recent history of political and social life in China through the voice of a young girl. (See also *Little Leap Forward* – for younger/less-proficient readers with similar storyline) **Middle Years: yrs 5-7**

Gavin Jamila (2003) ***The Blood Stone***, Egmont, London (**Silk route**) **Venice, India, Afghanistan**

Geronimo Veroneo acted unwisely when he decided to set off adventuring in Hindustan leaving his wife and children to run the family jewellery business in Venice. His voyage to Hindustan is long, dangerous and circuitous: his physical and emotional courage is tested in the desert; at the court of the great Shah Jehan, and on the mountainous route to Hindustan. **Middle Years: yrs 7-8**

Also by Jamila Gavin ***Out of India*** (2002) and ***Walking on my hands*** (2007). An autobiography for children in two parts which is a humorous account of a young girl of English and Indian heritage living in London in the 50's and 60's. **Yrs 3-4**

The ***Surya*** trilogy: ***The wheel of Surya*** (1992), ***The eye of the horse*** (1995) and ***The track of the wind*** (1997) India. Set at the time of Partition in 1947, and the years following this series is an excellent fictional account of one family trying to survive and re-establish their lives. **Yrs 5-7**

Geason, Susan (2007) ***Rebel girl***. ABC books. **China**

Su-Yin is sold by her father after he has gambled away the family's small fortune. She is taken a long way from her rural home to Nanjing to work as a kitchen hand in the household of a wealthy official. When the revolutionary Taiping soldiers come the family is slaughtered except for a young spoilt girl, Li-lin who Su-Yin has to somehow send to surviving family in another city. Set in the mid 1800s. **Middle Years: yrs 6-8**

Grindley Sally (2006) ***Spilled Water***. A & C Black. **China**

Following the death of her father, eleven-year-old Si-Yan's mother at first retreats into herself before regrouping to look after her children, Si-Yan and Li-Hu, her five-year-old son. Together they keep their tiny farm running. Drought followed by storms sees the farm destroyed and the family having to move in with Uncle Ba—and it is Uncle Ba who insists that Si Yan be sold in order to relieve costs and to contribute to the family income.

Also by Sally Grindley; ***Broken Glass*** (2008) Street children in **India** **Middle Years: yrs 4-6**

Guo Yue and Farrow, Clare. (2008) ***Little Leap Forward: a boy in Beijing***, Barefoot Books. **China**

Little Leap Forward narrates the story of his family's life set in the traditional housing in the alleyways of Beijing before and after the Cultural Revolution. The importance of individual creativity and freedom become more central as the weight of an oppressive system begins to affect the family and friends of Little Leap forward. A gentle and perceptive book suitable for grades 3-6. **Middle Years: yrs 4-6**

Ha Jin (2000) ***The Bridegroom: stories***. Random House. **China**

A collection of contemporary stories, set in a rural Chinese city. **Senior secondary /adult**

Also by Ha Jin: ***Waiting*** (1999) ***In the Pond*** (2001)

Hawke, Rosanne (2010) ***Marrying Ameera***. Angus & Robertson. **Australia/Pakistan**

Ameera's father sends her from Adelaide to Kashmir for a family wedding. Ameera arrives to find that the wedding is hers. A modern take on the subject of arranged marriages, which usually have a traditional/tribal context and an insight into culture conflict as Ameera's father struggles with his duty and family honour at the expense of losing his Australian family. **Later Middle Years: yrs 8-10**

Heinrich, Sally (2007) ***Hungry ghosts***. Hachette. **Singapore/Australia**

Sarah, newly arrived from Singapore, is not really enjoying the family's new life in Australia but she is happy enough to get on with things as long as she is left alone to study and enjoy her new found love of swimming. But when she eats a yam cake, part of an offering during the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, the angry ghost Pei enters her life and changes everything. Until Pei came along, Sarah was impatient with 'stupid Chinese superstitions'. Indeed, as the narrator of this story she is subdued and almost pedantic, reflecting her matter-of-fact and orderly character. That she is the one with 'Yin eyes' who can see and talk to ghosts is enjoyably ironic.

**Middle Years: yrs 4-6**

Lahiri, Jhumpa (2003) ***The Namesake***. Harper. **India/USA**

Gogol, a child of Bengali parents living in the US, is named after his father's favourite author and it's a name he dislikes intensely. A cross-cultural, multigenerational story of a Hindu Bengali family's journey to self-acceptance in Boston, Lahiri explores themes of immigrant experience and foreignness, clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation, the tangled ties between generations and paints a portrait of an Indian family torn between the pull of respecting family traditions, and the American way of life. **Senior secondary /adult**

Lapcharoensap, Rattawut (2005) ***Sightseeing***. Picador. **Thailand**.

Seven short stories set in Thailand that explore the intricacies of modern-day relationships. The overriding themes are not specific to that country, though: each tale focuses on family dynamics and dysfunction. **Senior secondary /adult**

Law, Benjamin (2009) ***Family Law***, Black Inc **Aust/ Hong Kong**

A hilarious series of contemporary and un-stereotyped autobiographical short stories about a very funny and unconventional Asian/Australian family. **Senior secondary /adult**

Li Cunxin (2003) ***Mao's last dancer***, Penguin. **China**

The autobiography of Cunxin Li (now an Australian citizen) in young adult and adult editions as well as an audio CD version and feature film (DVD) Cunxin is chosen among many other young school boys from remote villages to leave home and join an elite dancing academy. The journey from isolated and poor but loving family to strict and rigidly controlled institution is movingly portrayed. **Also available in picture book (*The Peasant Prince*), reader, junior novel. P-12**

Marsden, Carolyn (2007) ***When heaven fell***, Candlewick Press. **Vietnam/USA**

Di Hai a child of a Vietnamese mother and U.S soldier father was repatriated to the U.S after the Vietnam war and given up for adoption. Thirty years old, single, and an art teacher Di Hai returns to Vietnam for a holiday creating a stir amongst her Vietnamese relatives. There is confusion and disappointment on both sides (Di Hai & her Vietnamese extended family) as the extent of the misunderstandings around wealth and status are revealed. Through some painful and embarrassing moments, each side begins to understand more fully the way in which they can assist and truly know and accept each other. This would be a good text for exploring stereotypes and intercultural understanding. **Middle Years :yrs 5-10**

Meehan, Kierin. (2001) ***Hannah's Winter***. Puffin, **Japan**

Hannah goes to Japan to stay with the Maekawa family in their stationery shop in Kanazawa on the island of Honshu. When Hannah and Miki find a mysterious riddle they are drawn into a fantasy world and an odd sequence of events, some supernatural.

Also by Kierin Meehan:

***Night Singing* (2003) Japan**

***In the Monkey Forest*. (2005) Japan**

**Middle Years: yrs 4-6**

Murakami, Haruki.(1999) ***South of the border, west of the sun***. Harvill Press. **Japan**

Romance is the theme of this novel written by award-winning novelist Murakami, one of Japan's most popular authors. Two only children who were schoolmates and best friends meet again after a 25-year separation.

**Senior secondary /adult**. Also by Haruki Murakami: ***A wild sheep chase* (1989) *Norwegian Wood* (2000) *After the quake***

Murray, Kirsty (2010) ***India dark***. **India**

For thirteen year old Poesy Swift, travelling with Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company is a chance to escape the poverty and sadness of her home in Melbourne. The children's troupe has a performer as young as seven years but trouble is brewing with the older performers brushing up against the control of manager, Arthur Percival. And things go very much downhill when the expected tour of the United States is changed to a cobbled together tour of India via the Dutch East Indies and Malaysia.

Also by Kirsty Murray:

***The Secret life of Maeve Lee Kwong* (2006) Chinese/Australian **Middle Years: yrs 6-8****

Na, An. (2002) ***A Step from Heaven***. Allen & Unwin, **Korea/USA**

This novel traces the story of an immigrant family from Korea as they start a new life in America. Told in the first person by Young Ju from her earliest memories to her departure for College, it is a story of family hardship and hope. **Middle Years: yrs 8-10**

Nam Le (2009) ***The Boat***, Penguin. **Australia/Vietnam**

This acclaimed volume of seven stories by Australian Nam Le takes the reader from Medellin, Columbia to Japan, Iran, Australia and other exotic places, flaunting the writer's traditional maxim 'write what you know'. The familiar trope of the search for identity especially the tension for children of migrant parents is turned on its head with Nam Le's supple and convincing shifting of characters. Name Le confounds the readers attempt to pigeonhole or find the 'authentic' or singular author voice. **Senior secondary /adult**

Park, Linda Sue. (2001) ***A Single Shard***. Clarion Books. **Korea**

The orphan, Tree-ear, lives under a bridge in a potter's village in medieval Korea and yearns to be able to throw the delicate pots himself. **Middle Years: yrs 4-6**

Pham Hoa (2000) ***Vixen***, Sceptre, Sydney **Vietnam/Australia**

Civil unrest forces the fox fairy to flee from Vietnam to the land of 'the new gold mountain' – Australia. She is a spirit able to take the form of a woman or a fox at will, from the Imperial Citadel and country Vietnam to Melbourne suburbs and the Ballarat bush where spirits are everywhere.

Hoa Pham is now an editor on the on-line literary magazine for Asian-Australian arts and culture, Peril. **Senior secondary /adult** <http://www.peril.com.au/>

Pung, Alice (editor) ***Growing up Asian in Australia***. Black Inc.

Asian-Australians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders. In this collection they tell their own stories with verve, courage and humour. **Senior secondary /adult**

Also by Alice Pung: ***Unpolished Gem*** (2007)

Rai, Bali (2009) ***City of ghosts***. Random House. **India**

A fictionalised account of the conditions in Amritsar and the Punjab in the time preceding the Massacre. Rai brings together a number of disparate characters and events that culminate in the massacre.

**Middle Years: yrs 6-8**

Rippin, Sally (2009) ***Just one wish***, Penguin (Aussie Chomps readers) **Australia/China**

Little Pumpkin negotiates life at a new school in Australia with the help of a sympathetic teacher and a magical wish pouch given to her by her Nai Nai (grandmother). Settling in is made harder by the strange behaviour of her cousin Betty who has lived with her family in Australia for a few years.. The story allows insight into the family's reasons for migrating and the stresses experienced by the whole family as they attempt to fulfil their aspirations. Also by Sally Rippin: ***The Really big food project, Chengxi and the foreigner*** (2002) and picture books: ***Speak Chinese Fang Fang!***, ***Fang Fang's new year*** and ***What a mess, Fang Fang! (1990's)*** **Yrs 2-4**

Staples, Suzanne Fisher (1989) ***Daughter of the Wind***. Walker. **Pakistan**.

Eleven-year-old Shabanu and her family live a nomadic life in the Cholistan Desert of Pakistan breeding camels and living according to Islamic law and their own complex traditions. When disaster wrecks her sister's carefully planned wedding, Shabanu's betrothed becomes her sister's husband and Shabanu is betrothed again, this time to a much older man. Although an older title now, this story stands up well and could be used in conjunction with ***Marrying Ameer***. Also by Suzanne Fisher Staples; ***Haveli*** (1993) continues the story of Shabanu. ***Shiva's fire*** (2000) **India** **Middle Years: Yrs 5-7**

Starke, Ruth. (2000) ***NIPS XI***. Lothian **Australia**

Lan hates the annual school Multicultural Day because it makes him feel different. As an alternative he decides to start a school cricket team, with students of Asian background. A funny, heart-warming story that acknowledges the complexities of cultural diversity in Australian society. **Years 3-6**

Also by Ruth Starke;

***NIPS go national*** (2003) The NIPS cricket team travel to Melbourne for a multicultural tournament.

***Noodle Pie*** (2008) Andy thinks his Dad's behaviour in Vietnam is odd. Father and son are visiting Dad's family in Hanoi, bringing masses of gifts as is expected from 'Viet Kieu', Vietnamese who live overseas.

Indeed a lot is expected of them and Andy is increasingly irritated by the apparent greed, rudeness and even ruthlessness of the people of Hanoi— and his own family. Visitors, it seems to Andy, are seen as sources of money, not welcomed as guests, and he compares behaviour with what is expected at home in Australia. This is a vivid picture of contemporary Vietnamese city life through Andy's eyes. **Middle Years: yrs 5-7**

Tan, Shaun (2006) ***The Arrival***.

The Arrival, winner of almost every book award nationally (and internationally), is a wordless picture book describing a man fleeing from possible persecution (represented symbolically) and his journey to a new country. The overwhelming strangeness of a new language and culture are imaginatively and vividly described. **Suitable for use P-12**. <http://www.shauntan.net/books.html>

Shaun Tan's website has information about his publications, projects and technique, including an article reproduced from **Viewpoint: on reading for young adults** about the process of writing *The Arrival*.

Also by Shaun Tan: ***Tales from Outer Suburbia*** (2007)

Wang, Gabrielle (2010) ***Little Paradise***. Penguin. **Australia/China**

Lei An, a young Chinese Australian girl, changes her name to 'Mirabel'. Her horrified mother, believing for strong reasons of her own that names determine one's destiny, takes Lei An to a soothsayer who arms Lei An/Mirabel with a foretelling, in verse, and a small bag of oracle bones. And so Mirabel sets off on an amazing journey; a wartime saga, romantic and dangerous; based on real events in Wang's family. Set in the aftermath of WW2, in Melbourne and Shanghai. **Middle Years: yrs 6-9**

Also by Gabrielle Wang (for younger readers):

***The garden of Empress Cassia*** (2002) **Yrs 3-5**



***The Pearl of Tiger Bay*** (2004) **Australia/China** Yrs 3-5  
***The Hidden Monastery***. (2006) **Australia/China** Yrs 3-6  
***A ghost in my suitcase*** (2009) **Australia/China** Yrs 3-6

Wilkinson, Carole. (2003) ***Dragonkeeper***. Black Dog Books, **China**

In Ancient China, a young slave girl must help Long Danzi, the last Imperial dragon, make his way to the sea. It is a long and dangerous journey, and this award-winning fantasy novel has all the right elements: a shady dragon hunter, a mysterious stone, a friendly rat and a journey of self-discovery for the slave-girl, Ping, as well as background about China during the Han Dynasty. **Middle Years: yrs 3-7.**

Other titles in the ***Dragonkeeper*** series:

***The Garden of the Purple Dragon*** (2005)

***Dragon Moon*** (2007)

***Dragon dawn*** (2008)

Yen Mah, Adeline. (1999) ***Chinese Cinderella***. Puffin. **China**

When Adeline Yen Mah's mother died giving birth to her, she was shunned by her family and considered bad luck. This is the story of her struggle for acceptance. The adult version of this story is ***Falling Leaves***.

Also by Adeline Yen Mah: ***Chinese Cinderella and the Secret Dragon Society***. (2004) **Middle Years: yrs 3-8**

White, Trudy (2005) ***Japan Diary***, Curriculum Corporation, **Japan**

This fictionalised diary has two parts: one written by Taro a Japanese exchange student in Australia and the other Amelia from Australia living in Japan. Taro lives with Amelia's family and Amelia with Taro's. The diaries describe often humorously how each copes in a new environment and culture revealing the differences in attitudes and customs of each family and society. Features some Japanese language. **Middle years: yrs 5-9**

Xinran (200) ***Miss Chopsticks***, Chatto & Windus **China**

The social & financial changes in China through the lives of three sisters for rural China who head to Nanjing to find work. **Senior secondary /adult**

Yan, Geling (2007) ***The Uninvited***, Faber and Faber. **China**

A young couple (Dan and Little Plum) struggle to improve their income and lifestyle by moving to Beijing. Through a series of accidents and mistaken perceptions, the husband (Dan) takes on the identity of a journalist and becomes renowned for his fearless (mostly accidental) criticism of government and big business. There is comedy and tension in the events portrayed which illustrate the gap between Dan's knowledge and education and the part he is attempting to play. The uneven prosperity and rapid changes experienced by Chinese people with the coming of Chinese styled capitalism makes this a fascinating and revealing chronicle of contemporary life in Beijing. **Senior secondary /adult**

Yang, Gene Luen (2006) ***American born Chinese***, First Second Books. **USA/China**

A graphic novel (fabulously illustrated) that interweaves a contemporary but faithful interpretation of the Monkey King tale with a coming of age - search for identity / acceptance story. The experiences of the main character (Jin) are painful yet humorous as he deals with overt and covert schoolyard bullying/racism, a crush on the alpha female of the class and his conflicted feelings about the new Asian immigrant who enrolls at the school. Towards the end of the book, the once separate parallel tales begin to interact. The author deftly and in a darkly comic way reveals the relevance of each tale and set of characters to each other. **Later middle years/ Later years/adult**

LMERC holds many picture books & big books suitable for **K- 3** with Asia related themes –please contact us for more information.

LMERC subscribes to the quarterly ***Asian Literary Review***. Browse at LMERC or borrow back copies.

### **Some useful websites:**

**Open Space** [http://openspaceindia.org/oldsite/poets\\_speak.htm](http://openspaceindia.org/oldsite/poets_speak.htm) examples of contemporary Asian poetry  
**Paper Republic** <http://paper-republic.org> about contemporary Chinese literature for adults in translation with author biographies and excerpts)

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